

# A Proposal for Change in Oregon's Forests

M. President,

Today, I am honoring a commitment and submitting for public review a proposal to protect old growth forests and to aggressively move to restore through thinning the millions of acres of at-risk forests across our state.

The novelist Ellen Glasgow once remarked that "The only difference between a rut and a grave is their dimensions."

We find ourselves today in a decades-old rut that threatens our forests and lives like never before. It is time for change for Oregon's forests, and that change can only begin with new ideas; ideas that depart radically from recent decades of forests mismanagement, old growth destruction, catastrophic fire, and political gamesmanship.

We must break the cycle of endlessly fighting the old, un-winnable battles in the woods that have endangered forests and communities alike. We must make preparations now to move forward under new national leadership in 2009, to restore our endangered forests with sustainable, ecologically-beneficial restoration thinning, while permanently protecting our few remaining old growth forests. We must create new, sustainable jobs in forestry for now and for the future, and finally meet the economic and ecological promise of the Northwest Forest Plan. We must change the mindset in our federal land management bureaucracies by requiring large-scale efforts to address the obscene backlog of at-risk forests, and by restoring the tools and public trust required to accomplish their jobs. We must change the way the federal government manages Oregon's forests.

I am hopeful that my proposal, driven by science and the will of Oregonians to end the destruction of old growth and restore Oregon's at-risk forests through sustainable thinning, can help begin a dialogue that leads to the change that is so desperately needed in our forests. I invite all Oregonians to review my proposal and share their thoughts at [www.wyden.senate.gov/forestproposal](http://www.wyden.senate.gov/forestproposal). My staff and I will review those comments and seek to improve upon it before it is introduced as legislation in the United States Senate.

Oregon forests are the foundation of Oregon's natural, historical, and sociological culture. Unfortunately, many decades of scientifically-unsound forest management have created dangerous risks that now threaten our forests and our cultural identity. Instead of making progress on the enormous backlog of priority management initiatives that could restore our forests, for the past 15 years, presidentially-imposed political agendas have taken precedence over common sense opportunities to move forward toward an ecologically-sound, economically-advantageous, and fully sustainable forest future. Scientifically-unsupportable agendas and the resulting cycle of mistrust,

litigation, and institutional paralysis now threatens vast tracts of Oregon's forest land and what little remains of Oregon's ancient forests.

The federal government owns 51% of Oregon, and most of that is forest land. Due to decades of poorly-designed even-aged management and fire suppression, we have today many millions of acres of choked, second growth forest at an unacceptably high risk for catastrophic fires, disease, and insect infestation. Fire, disease, and infestation respect few geographic boundaries, posing a severe risk to private landowners and communities alike.

At the 2008 Oregon Economic Summit in Portland, I announced that I would begin work on a proposal to address the bureaucratic and political roadblocks to restoring the millions of acres of choked, second growth plantations in moist, west-side forests, and the many at-risk dry forests, particularly found in eastern and southern Oregon, and put thousands of Oregonians back to work in the woods in the process. I promised to attempt to avoid a return to the counter-productive and senseless forest battles of the last couple of decades, battles fought over logging in old growth and environmentally sensitive forests, areas which tend to be far more fire resistant and play a critical role in water quality and species protection.

Today, I am honoring my commitment, and intend to use my chairmanship of the Senate Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests to attempt to bring Oregon the change our forests so desperately need.

The guiding premise of my proposal is to direct and help the federal land agencies to move forward quickly, with local input, on what should be the most critical, least controversial objectives for restoring our federal forests in Oregon, and to move those agencies away from practices that have been widely discredited and are not supported by the public.

In short, my proposal expedites restoration of Oregon's forests by thinning the millions of acres of choked plantations and dry, at-risk forests that pose a risk to lives, forests, and property, and attempts to begin the task of restoring public trust in federal land management agencies by permanently ending the commercial logging of Oregon's old growth forests. Forest Service and BLM managers in Oregon would be given new direction based on the principles of restoration forestry. Over-stocked stands and stands unhealthy due to a lack of age or species diversity would become the focus. They would be instructed to avoid all old growth and inventoried roadless areas, and incorporate a comprehensive aquatic conservation strategy into all projects. Activities conducted under this new management direction would receive the expedited administrative procedures and limits on administrative appeals, because they would then be focusing on critical priorities in what should be non-controversial areas.

My proposal further works to restore the trust of the public in our federal land agencies by giving those agencies an incentive to pursue new, sustainable forest management directives and creating the first-ever automatic, independent review of the agencies' forest management actions, as well as unprecedented transparency and accountability for their actions.

The overwhelming body of scientific evidence assigns a negative ecological value to the cutting down of Oregon's remaining old growth forests. Science has demonstrated time and again that old and mature trees play an indispensable role in preserving water quality for communities, providing critical wildlife habitat, and storing carbon gases that contribute to global warming. Further, the evidence shows that these older trees are far more resistant to fire than younger trees. Equally important, after the disappearance of over 90% of Oregon's old growth forests over last century, Oregonians no longer support the cutting of what little old growth remains on our public lands. In the drier forests found predominately, but not exclusively, on the east side of our state, the old growth picture is somewhat more complicated due to decades of questionable forestry management, unwise fire suppression, and the encroachment of inappropriate, non-native tree species. Many scientists and environmentalists agree that more active forest management will have to be pursued quickly on the east-side forests if we hope to save native older trees and restore a healthy, diverse, and more fire-resistant mix to forests currently under relentless and potentially devastating assault by catastrophic fire, disease, and insect infestation.

For these reasons, I am proposing permanent protection from logging for all remaining old growth and mature trees in Oregon's federal forests. In the mostly west-side "moist" forests, no tree currently 120 years or older would be allowed to be cut ever again for commercial purposes. In the drier forests, no tree currently 150 years or older would be allowed to be cut ever again for commercial purposes. The decades-old debate over the fate of old growth forests in Oregon would finally come to an end.

There is a crisis crying out for action across the millions of acres of choked, at-risk federal forests in Oregon, and reasonable people on both sides of the forestry issue must come together before Oregon foolishly and needlessly loses more forests, property, and lives. What I am proposing today is to shift the focus of our federal land agencies off of logging old growth and other environmentally-sensitive areas, and onto addressing the horrific backlog of desperately-needed restoration thinning in Oregon's federal forests. This involves harvesting ground and ladder fuels in areas that should be considered non-controversial, fuels that currently endanger old growth and other healthy forests – federal, state and private alike -- as well as human and animal life. This new, required management focus will also finally allow us to achieve the once-envisioned economic potential of the Northwest Forest plan.

My proposal envisions that in many cases we will be able to achieve these goals by fostering further collaboration between timber companies and environmental groups. We have already seen great collaborative successes of this sort in the Siuslaw, Colville,

and other national forests, with the help of groups like Oregon Wild, The Nature Conservancy, and K-S Wild. My proposal creates an incentive for those partnerships to continue, but due to the enormous and dangerous backlog of work, collaboration must occur at a faster pace. Unfortunately, history has shown that we may not be able to rely solely on good will and collaboration, particularly if we don't also find a way to discourage the cycle of endless administrative appeals and litigation that has produced federal agency inertia and undermined even the most common-sense forestry management efforts.

Under my proposal, each Oregon federal forest and BLM district would be empowered to create a landscape-level restoration project of up to 25,000 acres designed by a local collaboration group. But if collaboration was not achieved, the land agency would be allowed to go forward, but on a smaller scale of 10,000 acres.

One of the reasons we have seen endless appeals and litigation is that, over the past several decades, the level of public trust in federal public lands agencies has fallen to levels so unhealthy as to jeopardize their ability to conduct even routine, common sense forest management projects. An era of mistrust of the federal land agencies, and the accompanying legacy of public protest, appeals, and litigation, has contributed to an institutional paralysis causing the land agencies to move far too passively in addressing the large-scale problems in our forests. To begin to restore public trust and empower the land agencies to move forward aggressively on restoring our forests, my proposal will bring an unprecedented level of scrutiny, transparency, and accountability to forest projects conducted under the new authorities I am proposing. Borrowing from the model of NOAA-regulated fisheries that employ observers to monitor the by-catch of dolphins, independent forest observers – hired and managed by the independent Inspectors General offices at the Departments of Interior and Agriculture -- will monitor each project conducted under my proposal to ensure that prohibitions against cutting old growth and mature trees, and cutting trees in roadless areas are strictly observed. The forest observer reports will be made available online to the public, and federal forests found violating environmental protections will lose their ability to use expedited project authorities for a several years, as a penalty.

For the sake of our environment, economy, and our way of life, we must come together to pursue a concerted, new focus on sustainable forestry management that will create thousands of new jobs and restore the health of our forests. The only way to produce this kind of change is to put new ideas forward that seek to find common ground and break away from the old politics that have led us to the situation we find ourselves in today. I am certain that there are many additional issues I will want to consider that may improve this proposal, and I invite and welcome the public's thoughts so we can finally emerge from this dangerous policy rut, and provide the change that the public so desperately desires.